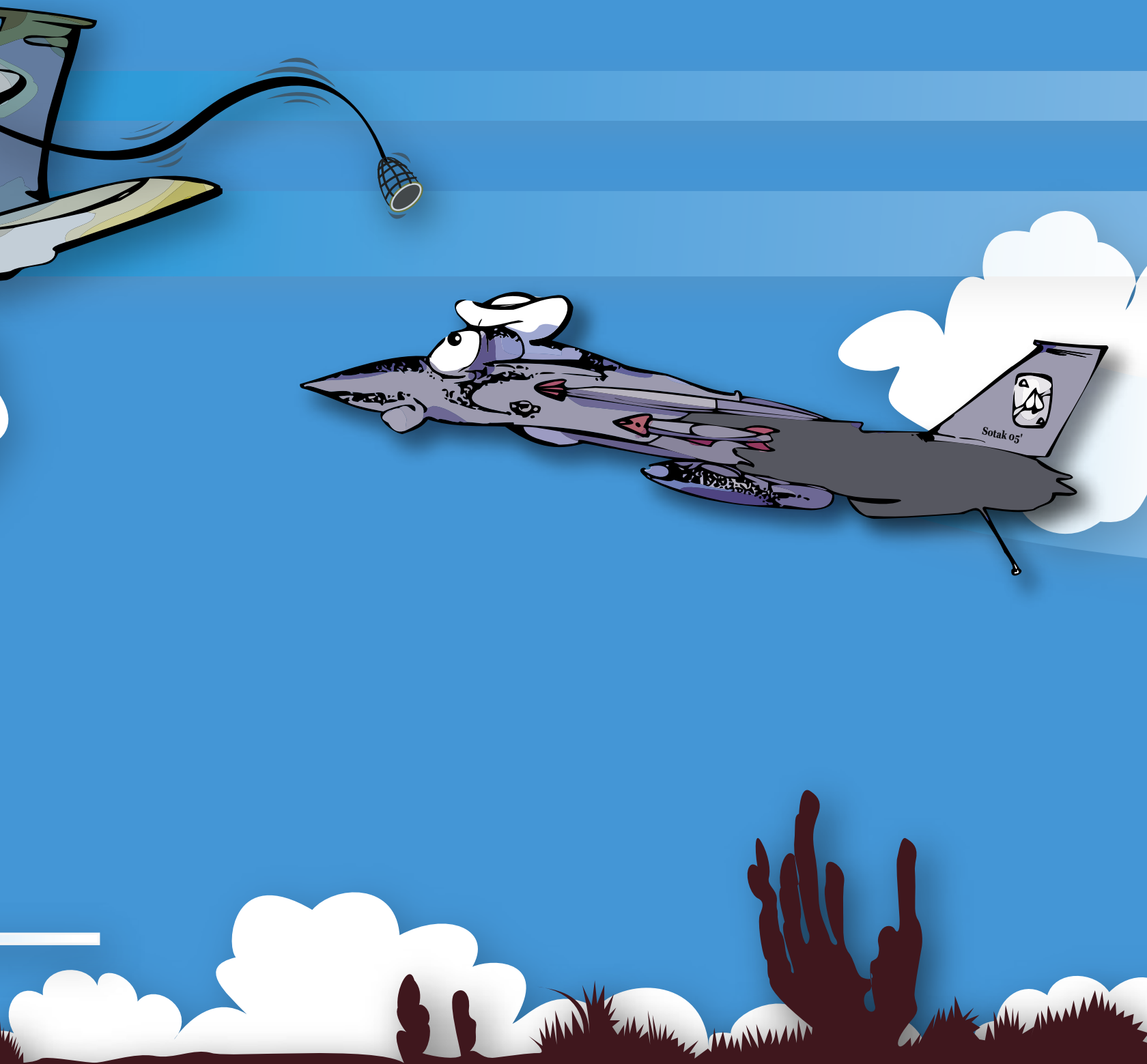


What could happen?

No Room for Complacency in OIF

By Lt Liam Booher and Lt jg Josh Appezzato





Courtesy Photo



Courtesy Photo

Early September found the Black Aces of VFA-41 in its fifth month of flying in support of Operation IRAQI FREEDOM. Most of the aircrew in the squadron, including those involved in this particular fight, had been “over the beach” more than two dozen times; they had seen a myriad of missions and were familiar with operating in Iraq. We had not dropped ordnance in months, and things had become fairly routine. Today was to be our final day of fight operations in theatre before the Battle Group was to depart the AOR, and the last words of the OPS brief were ominous: “Whatever you do, DO NOT DIVERT!!!” What bad could happen?

The beginning of the mission went off without a hitch. The squadron’s

F/A-18Fs had performed admirably throughout our time in the Persian Gulf, and this was shaping up to be another routine Shared Reconnaissance Pod (SHARP) mission. We completed the first half of our route, and went in search of our tanker. The KC-135 was on its way up from Qatar, and was a little behind schedule. We decided to expedite the join-up and pressed south to meet the tanker. We executed a textbook rendezvous and noticed that this particular KC-135 was equipped with Wing Air Refueling (WARP) pods; therefore, we would not have to face the refueling boom-mounted basket, also known as “The Iron Maiden.” As the lead jet, we moved into pre-contact position on the starboard pod, while our wingman took the same position

on the port pod. Once cleared in, we plugged and waited for our wingman to do the same, and this is where things got sporty.

Once the aircraft probe engages the basket, the pod is supposed to take up any slack in the refueling hose, keeping the hose taught between the two aircraft. But there was no take-up response on the starboard reel, and within seconds of plugging, the pod's amber light illuminated and began flashing. With our aircraft at idle we watched helplessly as the refueling hose formed a large sine wave that began to travel back towards our probe. There was nothing we could do; with a hard shudder and a blinding deluge of jet fuel, the front part of our probe was torn asunder. For a brief moment, it dangled in the basket and then the drogue ung our broken probe past the vertical stabs and towards the Iraqi desert below.

We backed off the tanker, moved to a safe starboard observation, and passed to our wingman that we were all right, but that we were definitely going to have to divert. Thankfully, we were loaded out for a reconnaissance mission, and had plenty of gas to divert. Our wingman, however, needed to get some gas before we pressed to the divert field. He plugged on the left side and encountered the same problem. Again there was no take-up response from the pod, and he came within moments of losing his probe to the whip-like sine wave. We decided then and there that this just wasn't our day and that it was time to go. With no probe, we could not return to the carrier with our current fuel state; we would have to divert.

Here is where the beauty of the two-seat cockpit comes into play. While the two pilots in the formation discussed on-deck fuel states and checked each other's jets for damage, the lead WSO coordinated with the controller and passed, contrary to the tanker's claim, that the KC-135 was definitely sour. The tanker then confessed to a degraded hydraulic system, which accounted for the malfunction of the take-up reel. We put Tallil airfield on the nose and double-checked each other's fuel calculations for the 250-mile transit. Thankfully, it was a clear afternoon in Iraq and getting a visual on the runway was not difficult. After individual straight-ins we were safely on deck, where the USAF folks took great care of us.

There are several good lessons to be learned from our experience. Complacency is difficult to combat, especially ying long missions day-in and day-out. Thankfully, all aircrew involved were familiar with theater diverts, and it took zero time to decide where we would go and just how much gas we would need. Adherence to procedures was paramount; when the lead pilot lost his probe, he instinctively backed away from the tanker and took a safe position on the tanker's bearing line to troubleshoot. Out of habit, his only mistake was to momentarily cycle the probe, but he caught it before it retracted. Our wingman ew good mutual support and stayed with us. Sanitized cockpits kept ICS chatter down and SA high, as four heads in two airplanes covered all of the

contingencies while setting up for our first field landing in 6 months. The effects of: anti-skid, lights, runway length, field emergencies, arresting gear, and carrier-pressurized tires and struts were carefully considered and discussed in both cockpits. Of course, surface-to-air threats were also in the backs of our minds as we approached the runway. As for our triumphant return to the carrier, fuel was still a major concern. With our reconnaissance loadout, we had a very low max trap and would only have 2 good looks at the ship before we would have had to divert to Kuwait since we would be unable to refuel. Fortunately, it was a clear night and we had no problems snagging the third wire on the first pass, but divert numbers and field info were part of our brief. Perhaps most importantly, the carrier aviators involved also learned not to walk off the tarmac in Iraq for fear of unexploded bomblets and land mines, a lesson they thankfully didn't have to learn the hard way!

Lt Booher and Lt jg Appezzato y with the World Famous Black Aces of VFA-41. ✨

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